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Kremlin Fears Restive Ukraine, CIA Report Says

The real reason for the Kremlin-instigated crackdown on Poland, secret CIA reports suggest, was to prevent the Solidarity labor movement from spreading to the restive Ukraine inside the Soviet Union.

Intelligence cables from Moscow periodically include reports of sit-ins and protest demonstrations in the Ukraine. But for the most part, these have been spontaneous, uncoordinated incidents that were quickly suppressed by the authorities. And that's the way the Kremlin intends to keep it.

"After the Russian Republic itself, there is no area of the Soviet empire more important to Moscow than the Ukraine," a secret CIA report points out.

Nor is there any area where nationalist fervor has persisted with more determination and where the populace has more stubbornly resisted decades of attempted Russification.

"The Ukrainians possess characteristics which, taken together, give them a unique position among Soviet minorities," states the CIA report, which was reviewed by my associate Dale Van Atta.

"Some of these features—the cohesiveness of the Ukrainian population, the economic significance of their area, the historical longevity of the Ukraine as a distinct ethnic community conscious of an independent cultural heritage, and the Ukraine's susceptibility to western cultural influences—would seem to increase the ability of the Ukrainians to resist Russification pressures."

Analysts also point out that, like Poland (of which the western Ukraine was a part before World War II), the Ukraine has large iron and coal mines.

"Those kinds of industries have created the same sorts of labor problems as they did in Poland," noted one expert, "including long hours, six-day weeks and unsafe working conditions." It will be remembered that Solidarity began as a labor movement, not an anti-Communist uprising.

In time, the analysts suggested, "the mood could develop" among the Ukrainians to imitate Solidarity.

While the Ukrainian communist party enjoys a privileged position in the Soviet Union, and Ukrainians are treated "on an almost equal footing with Russians" in recruitment for top jobs, they are still not trusted to withstand the siren song of Ukrainian nationalism, the CIA report notes.

The Polish crisis wasn't the first

time the Kremlin had cause to worry about the Ukraine.

In 1941, Ukrainians welcomed Hitler's invading troops with flowers and hailed them as liberators from Stalin and the Russian oppressors. Ukrainian volunteers fought with the Germans against the Red Army.

In 1968, the decisive factor in the Kremlin's decision to invade Czechoslovakia was fear that the liberalizing effects of the "Prague spring" would spread across the border into the Ukraine.

And four years later, Ukrainian party boss Petr Shelest was ousted when he showed a dangerous tendency to go easy on Ukrainian nationalist dissidents.

The man who engineered Shelest's downfall was the head of the KGB in the Ukraine, Vitaly Vasilyevich Fedorchuk. Though a Ukrainian, he had none of Shelest's qualms about suppressing Ukrainian aspirations with truly Stalinist ruthlessness.

Not surprisingly, Fedorchuk's hard-line suppression in the Ukraine endeared him to Leonid Brezhnev, himself an alumnus of the Ukrainian apparatus.

Fedorchuk now heads the entire Soviet KGB. Western intelligence analysts note glumly that any man who put down his own people so harshly will be unlikely to balk at stifling dissidents throughout the Soviet Union. And that is precisely what is happening.